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ABSTRACT

The new call to action on foreign language competence is addressed to administrators and academic officers of higher education institutions. Based on recent reports on education, it is proposed that American colleges and universities are not succeeding in equipping students to live and communicate in an international world, and that the problem can not be solved by foreign language departments alone. Focus and coordination are called for from leadership at the highest levels to produce and attain goals for foreign language competence by the year 2000. Recommendations for educational commitment and action address specific aspects of these general areas: providing continuity in language learning throughout the educational process; stressing language competence as a vital educational outcome; and providing institutional initiatives that will facilitate the language learning process for students and faculty. Common myths about language learning are outlined. Appended materials include a summary of information from recent reports concerning the current status of international and foreign language competence; and a collection of comments by policymakers in government, business, and education on the need for international and language competence. (MSE)

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A call for foreign language competence by the year 2000

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WHAT WE CAN'T SAY CAN HURT US

A call for foreign language competence by the year 2000

"All college and university graduates must be knowledgeable about the broader world and conversant in another language."

America in Transition-The International Frontier,
National Governors Association,1989

American Council on Education
Policy Statement

Foreword

American educators and policymakers have come to the sobering conclusion that learning other languages is an essential part of an education for today's and tomorrow's world. Other nations have succeeded in teaching their young people to be proficient in a second and even third language; but our great nation has been unable or unwilling to do the same.

This statement, developed by the American Council on Education's Commission on International Education and endorsed by the ACE Board of Directors, calls on higher education leaders to make foreign language competence an integral part of a college education. Every baccalaureate holder should be competent in a second language; we can settle for no less as we move into the next century.

The following pages elaborate on how we can achieve this ambitious goal, providing concrete suggestions that will help us move forward and shed our unenviable image of "tongue-tied Americans," to use a phrase of Senator Paul Simon. We recognize that the task we face is considerable, but the payoff to our national well-being will be worth the effort. We cannot be a leader in the world while our citizens are captive of their inability to communicate beyond our borders.

We offer this statement to colleges and universities in the hope that it will provide a point of departure, a basis for discussion and for much-needed action.

Robert H. Atwell
President
American Council on Education

A CALL TO ACTION

This new call to action on foreign language competence is addressed to the leaders of American higher education—the presidents and chancellors, academic vice presidents, provosts and deans who are responsible for giving academic direction to our colleges and universities. It calls for action by all who are shocked and dismayed by reports of the level of ignorance of Americans regarding the rest of the world and those who are concerned by our continued inability to communicate with other people using their native language.

The statement is addressed primarily to presidents and academic officers because they are the people who can lead institutions, through the faculty, to a sustained commitment to increase their students' understanding of other cultures and languages. The goal of competency in a foreign language requires institution-wide activity and commitment; it is not the business of language departments alone. If an institution is truly committed to providing students with an opportunity to achieve proficiency in a foreign language, that effort will affect the undergraduate curriculum, graduate education, institutional organization, and the faculty development and reward system.

Several recent reports point out the damage to U.S. interests caused by our ignorance of other cultures and languages. The President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies, the National Governors' Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the New England Board of Higher Education, the Business-Higher Education Forum, and several higher education associations have issued statements on the need for international and foreign language competence for our economic competitiveness, national security, and the protection of America's position in the world.

The recent report of the National Governor's Association (1989) states emphatically:

> "Knowledge of other languages is essential for business and trade with economic competitors. Foreign language study also can be an important bridge to the understanding of other countries and cultures..... All college and university graduates must be knowledgeable about the broader world and conversant in another language"

American colleges and universities are not yet succeeding in their mission to equip our students for life in an interdependent world and to prepare them to communicate with people who speak other languages. The problem cannot and will not be solved by foreign language departments acting alone. We call for focus and coordination from leadership at the highest levels.

- Few American colleges and universities require foreign language for degrees. Most students who do take foreign language courses cannot use the language to communicate effectively.

- Fewer than one half of one per cent of the 12 million students enrolled in American colleges and universities study abroad in any one year.

- Eighty per cent of all American-made goods now face direct international competition at home or abroad.

- Few American business leaders or employees can speak any foreign language; therefore corporations are increasingly hiring language-competent graduates from abroad.

- Over twenty per cent of American corporations now conduct business abroad; by the year 2000, that figure will be thirty per cent.

- The professions of science, medicine, engineering and agriculture are increasingly global. The percentage of scientific research published in other languages is increasing.

The American educational system should produce sufficient numbers of language-competent citizens to meet national needs — in business, in the professions, and in government. We urge U.S. colleges and universities to set goals for foreign language competence by the year 2000:

- Achieve usable levels of proficiency for all baccalaureate graduates. Achieve professional levels of foreign language proficiency for a significant proportion of all undergraduate and graduate students in order to meet foreign language needs for business and the professions.

- Provide opportunities for students in all disciplines and pre-professional programs to achieve high levels of foreign language proficiency by a combination of preparatory courses, intensive courses, and foreign study and internships, as well as the infusion of international and foreign language materials into substantive disciplinary courses.

- Increase significantly the percentage of all students who study abroad, their diversity, and the number of places to which they go.

- Provide opportunities for the achievement and maintenance of foreign language proficiency for faculty in all disciplines.

- Increase the number of language-competent elementary and secondary school teachers.

- Give students an awareness of how one learns languages as well as knowledge of specific languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide continuity in language learning throughout the educational process.

Foreign language training for Americans should start as early as possible, preferably in elementary school, and be carried through secondary school. Colleges and universities can support this goal by encouraging applicants to demonstrate foreign language competence as part of the admissions procedure. The purpose of introducing language in elementary and secondary schools is not to allow students to "examine out" of language requirements in college, but to give them a base on which to build higher level proficiency.

Teacher training should include foreign language competence and maintenance and opportunities to study abroad. Teachers at the elementary and secondary levels should be able to communicate in foreign languages and relate to other cultures.

Colleges and universities should be prepared to build on language skills acquired at the secondary school level by offering advanced language training and opportunities for use. Since secondary schools are increasingly providing foreign language instruction even in some previously rarely taught languages such as Japanese, Chinese, and Russian, colleges should do the same.

Colleges and universities should promote cooperative arrangements between elementary, secondary and postsecondary institutions in order to improve language instruction at all levels and to facilitate sequential learning. Coordination and cooperation among the different levels of education will increase efficiency and enhance our ability to achieve our goals. Furthermore, colleges and universities should strengthen teacher preparation programs in order to provide the necessary numbers of qualified language teachers at all levels of instruction.

Colleges and universities should encourage adult foreign language learning. Many adults discover a new need for learning or relearning a foreign language — for business, for travel, for general intellectual development. Genuine competence in a second language is attainable by all individuals, including adults, but it may require less emphasis on reading and writing, grammar and literature, than many college-level courses provide, and more work on speaking and listening skills, that is, on competence in using the language to communicate. Intensive programs like those of the Foreign Service Institute should be considered.

2. Stress language competence as a vital educational outcome.

Foreign language training should be considered a normal part of the education of every American. At least minimal levels of competence should be expected for every bachelor's degree. Foreign language and international competence should not be only for language and international studies majors.

Entrance requirements for foreign language can encourage students to begin their foreign language study during elementary or secondary school and are a proven method of increasing attention to foreign language teaching at the secondary school level. We encourage adoption of entrance requirements but note that care must be taken that such requirements do not limit access for students without adequate opportunity to study language in high school or for learning-disabled students for whom special provisions must be made.

Language requirements at every level should be expressed in terms of competency — ability to use the language — rather than number of courses taken. All four language skills — speaking, listening, reading and writing should be emphasized.

Because competency in communicating in foreign languages is key to cultural competence, proficiency should be the major goal of language instruction. Cultural competence is understanding how to deal with cultural differences, it requires effective use of the language of the culture.

Institutions should provide special opportunities for highly motivated and talented students to achieve high-level language proficiency. Institutions should create incentives to encourage students to acquire these skills. Upper level foreign language courses should include a variety of materials rather than only literature.

Intensive foreign language programs and study abroad are essential elements of achieving real proficiency in a foreign language. Success is higher if instruction is followed by use of the language in the country where it is spoken or by total immersion programs. This may require examining the structure of financial aid to ensure that financial aid students can enroll in full-time study opportunities at least for intensive summer work, and that aid is available for the serious language student for study or internship abroad. Study abroad programs should be built into the budgeting and pricing structure of any institution which is serious about foreign language instruction.

Leaders should promote and support use of the full range of technologies for providing individualized language instruction and for communicating with the world. Satellite links, new computer software, expanding computer networks, and video disks are especially important for the less commonly taught languages, where demand on an individual campus may be low.

Library resources must be sufficient to support the institution's language instruction programs. Budgets for new or expanded language programs should include funds for initial and ongoing library acquisitions.

Language instruction at both undergraduate and graduate levels must be better integrated with other studies and programs. This requires discussion and coordination both with the rest of the international program and with other departments, including pre-professional and professional studies such as business, agriculture, engineering, and health sciences. Institutions should examine the organizational structure to determine the best way to support such integration. A high-level coordinating committee and/or the appointment of a faculty-level administrator with appropriate resources can ensure that foreign languages, international studies, study abroad, and faculty development in international and foreign language fields support common institutional goals of international competence for all.

3. Provide institutional initiatives that will facilitate the process of language learning for students and faculty.

Academic leaders should keep track of and make public the percentage of their students in each major field who are taking foreign language courses and at what level. They should insist on evidence of proficiency attained by students in foreign language courses at various levels. Foreign language instructors should agree on attainable standards of performance and on appropriate courses and models to achieve the language competency goals.

Institutions should cooperate with each other in foreign language teaching wherever possible. Consortia and other forms of interinstitutional cooperation maximize the availability of resources and can be especially effective for the less commonly taught languages and area studies and for summer or inter-term intensive language institutes.

Faculty in other disciplines should be supported and encouraged to acquire or improve their foreign language skills and international knowledge. They can use these skills to increase opportunities for language competent students to use foreign languages and international expertise in a variety of disciplinary majors.

Institutions should inventory the foreign language and international competencies of their students, faculty, and staff and utilize that expertise in the education of their students. Utilization of already available resources is advisable. Use of native-born or foreign-born language competent individuals can help students achieve the goal of language competency.

Student/faculty campus programs using foreign languages should be expanded. Interest in foreign languages can be enhanced by exposure through multilingual social and cultural activities.

Faculty, administration, and students must be convinced of the importance to the mission of the institution of the international and foreign language dimension. We are educating now the students who will be the future leaders of America. Presidential leadership is crucial in obtaining these goals.

MYTHS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

- **Americans do not need foreign language since English is an international language.** The great majority of the peoples of the world are not English-speaking. Communicating and transacting business internationally is more effective when an effort is made to communicate in the relevant local language.

- **American businesses do not need multilingual employees** because they can hire English-speaking local residents and interpreters abroad. In fact, dependence on translation puts the American businessperson at a disadvantage and frequently leads to misunderstandings and possibly loss of business.

- **Americans are incapable of learning foreign languages.** Americans are not less capable than any other peoples of the world. However, most other people start the study of a second language earlier than we do, when it is easier for them to learn, and therefore have a head start when they reach college.

- **Adults cannot learn foreign languages.** There is no evidence that suggests that adults cannot learn other languages, but alternative techniques of language learning may be needed. Foreign language teachers already know a great deal about the most effective techniques.

- **College students are not interested in studying foreign languages.** Low levels of interest may reflect both societal attitudes and geographic factors. We now know a variety of ways to increase student motivation to become proficient in a foreign language. Good counseling and curriculum changes in incorporating international studies enhance student interest. In an increasingly interdependent world, communication in multiple languages is a vehicle to better understanding of cultures and business transactions.

APPENDIX 1

THE CURRENT STATUS OF INTERNATIONAL AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

A new major study conducted by Richard Lambert for the American Council on Education describes the problems:

- Fewer than half of the college students whose transcripts were examined had taken college level language courses past the intermediate level.

- Less than 9 percent of American universities require a foreign language for the baccalaureate degree for all students (although 22 percent of baccalaureate colleges do).

- Of those institutions that do require foreign language for all students, many require one year or less.

The National Governors' Association in its 1989 report, America in Transition-The International Frontier, states:

- The vast majority of U.S. citizens cannot speak a language other than English...

- Only 17 percent of U.S. public elementary schools offer any form of language instruction. Many that do offer classes offer only introductory exposure.

- Only one in five American high school graduates take more than two years of a foreign language and less than one in ten enroll in four years of language.

- A recent analysis of U.S. postsecondary students transcripts revealed that 53 percent took no basic foreign language classes during their undergraduate years.

- Twenty-six states report a shortage of foreign language teachers at either the elementary or secondary level.

Most students who do take a foreign language cannot use it to communicate.

- They do not study language long enough or under the necessary conditions to master it.

- An insufficient number of advanced courses concentrate on speaking and listening skills; most emphasize literature.

- Fewer than 50 thousand, or about .04 percent of over 12 million American college level students study abroad each year.

- Of those, 33 thousand studied in non-English speaking countries.

- Only 20 percent of those studying abroad stayed for the whole academic year.

The Council on International Education Exchange states in its 1988 report, "Educating for Global Competence," that:

- The U.S. is the only major world power with no language requirement for entering its foreign service. Key posts are filled by ambassadors who do not speak the local language and cannot read the local newspaper.

- Only 3 percent of American high school graduates and only 5 percent of our college graduates reach a meaningful proficiency in a second language despite the fact that many of them come from bilingual homes.

- As recently as three years ago, 33 states did not require any foreign language study in high school, and one of every five high schools did not offer any foreign language instruction at all.

- The U.S. continues to be one of the few nations in the world where a student can graduate from college without ever having studied a foreign language.

- Fewer than 1 percent of U.S. military personnel stationed abroad are able to use the language of their host country.

APPENDIX 2

THE NEED FOR INTERNATIONAL AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

International trade and interdependency of financial markets continue to increase while the U.S. is facing international financial problems partly due to the deterioration of our international competitiveness:

- In 1987 the U.S. exported $243 billion and imported about $400 billion, generating a trade deficit of over $150 billion.

- In 1986, U.S. assets abroad amounted to $1,067 billion while foreign assets held in the U.S. amounted to $1,331.5 billion.

- In 1985 the U.S. became the largest debtor nation in the world.

- The World bank reports that between 1965-80 U.S. exports were growing 6.9 percent annually; during 1980-86 the rate was 2.7 percent annually. Growth in imports increased from 6.2 percent to 9 percent annually during those periods.

- According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, 80 percent of all American-made goods now face international competition either at home or abroad.

To eliminate the significant trade deficits and the world's largest debtor nation status, Americans must become more active in trading and therefore must better understand and communicate with the world. Speaking other languages and understanding other cultures is a key element in maintaining our leadership role in the world community. The need for foreign language competence is exemplified by articles in business magazines and government and international association reports.

> *"How are we to sell our products in a global economy when we neglect to learn the language of the customer? How are we to open overseas markets when other cultures are only dimly understood."*
>
> **Governor of Virginia, L. Baliles,**
> **in America in Transition: The InternationalFrontier,**
> **the National Governor's Association, 1989**

...Speaking local languages is one way to gain competitive advantage. In increasingly competitive markets every little edge counts...

...42% of a sample of British businessmen thought they could have done better if they had taken the trouble to speak the local language...

... One reason Americans find it so difficult to do business with the rest of the world is that they are so ignorant of it. International comparisons of the number of Americans learning foreign languages rank the nation woefully low...

... Virtually all of Caterpillar's, an American maker of bulldozers, 550 staff in Geneva are at least bilingual...

... In the European subsidiaries of Dupont managers normally speak the local language. All the international executives of Nestle, a Swiss multinational, speak two languages without exception...

-The Economist the May 16, 1987

... widespread culture innocence and language illiteracy is one of the three factors of prime importance in resolving the persistent U.S. trade deficits...

... At least one factor contributing to the failure to cure the U.S. trade deficit seems to be the shocking lack of preparation expatriates receive before they go overseas... The importance of competence in the language of the host country cannot be stressed too much...

... The Business Council for International Understanding of Washington, D.C., estimates, based on their 30 year experience, that managers who go abroad without cross cultural preparation have a failure rate ranging from 33% to 66%. This contrasts with a rate of less than 2% failure for those with such training...

-Arthur Whitehill
In "America's Trade Deficit: The Human Problems"
In Business Horizons,Jan/Feb, 1988

... More technical journals are being published in other languages and the English speaking percentage of the total world population continues to decrease...

... A growing number of foreign governments, in the interest of exercising their national sovereignty, are requiring the sole use of their national languages in all contracts and contract negotiations...

... It is often desirable for U.S. Managers to speak directly with lower level employees in their foreign subsidiary and this usually requires the use of foreign language. Some international executives have encountered great difficulty in managing subordinates because of the inability to communicate verbally...

... Knowing the language facilitates one's comprehension of the culture, politics, laws, and environment of a foreign country, and breeds closer familiarity with the customer's business customs and decision making constraints. Language skills are also important in the growing need to understand and anticipate foreign economic and political developments in order to assess business risks...

-Nancy Henderson,
In "Selling Abroad: Speaking their Language",
In Business America, Sept. 7, 1981

...Shifting dynamics in world trade means that, more and more, the language of trade is the language of the customer. If the U.S. is to compete effectively and expand trade, it must continue to place a greater emphasis on adequate language instruction...

-The National Governor's Association
Committee on International and Foreign Relations
statement "Educating Americans for Tomorrow's World", July 87

... To fully appreciate differences in cultures we must understand other languages. It is no longer possible to assume that we will be able to sell our products, conduct our negotiations and understand our world in English. If we cannot communicate with the rest of the world, we will lose markets for our products and our ideas...

-The Southern Governor's Association
Advisory Council on International Education,
report on "Cornerstone of Competition", November, 1986

... Education must prepare us to participate fully in the global community...

... Urge colleges and universities to establish second language requirements for admissions to and graduates from appropriate post-secondary programs. The requirements should include demonstrated proficiency in speaking, understanding, reading and writing the second language...

-The Council of Chief State School Officers, report "International Dimensions of Education", November 1985

"International ignorance is a luxury that America can no longer afford."

-Business Higher Education Forum, summer 1988 meeting.

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